

PARENTS AS COLLABORATIVE TEAM MEMBERS

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION AND PRACTICE

PARENTS PLAY MANY ROLES

The roles of family members as a child's first and most significant teachers have long been acknowledged. Parents and other family members fulfill many roles in the education of their child. They are the ultimate decision makers about when to start school, where, and with what supports.

Family members and education professionals collaborate to form a team that ensures that the child receives appropriate and individualized assessment, evaluation, intervention, program monitoring, and evaluation. Parents participate as members of the assessment team, share in providing information for the development of the Individualized Educational Program (IEP), and provide input in the evaluation of the progress toward meeting the goals identified in the IEP and the overall effectiveness of the education program and process. Families also provide information and act as contributors in understanding the needs and motivations of the student on a day-to-day basis, such as what is bothering him or her or whether the student is ill.

In recognition of these roles, families and professionals collaborate closely to provide individualized assessment and intervention and educational services for students with disabilities. Remember, 1) family members know their child; 2) family members know their child within the context of their family; and 3) family members know their child within the context of their community and culture. Family members can share how the student organizes and solves problems; what he fears; and what her temperament, coping strategies, and emotional hot spots are.

Each family has a way of being and doing and getting things done. Parents know these roles and can share with the professional team members their expectations for their child based on their family and community values, beliefs, and goals in addition to their resources. Below are some strategies and guiding principles for parents and other family members to use in working as collaborative team members.

Be willing to share information about your child

One of the first roles that parents and family members are asked to fulfill is that of informant, to provide information about their child. This information may be past school experiences, medical history, and information about interactions outside the school with peers and family members. You must be clear and honest in this role, but feel obligated to share only what is relevant to your child's education. If you are unclear or unsure about issues of confidentiality, ask for clarification about who will have access to the information and how it will be used.

Be willing to assist with assessments and evaluations

Family input is critical to identifying the child's strengths and areas of needs. Professional members should help families by explaining and describing various ways for family members to participate in the assessment process. For example, some family members may choose to complete a questionnaire at home; others may choose a more active role in the assessment process. Family members may share medical records and other less formal documents, such as baby books and pictures, that illustrate the child's abilities and interactions in the family.

Assume the role of partner with the professionals who work with your child

As family members, you can offer strategies that you have found to be effective with your child. Sometimes these can be implemented at school as well. Share with the team members why something did not work and whether you think it might work if tried in a different way. Also be honest in your assessment of strategies and interventions. If you disagree with something, say so, especially if you share why you disagree and are willing to provide alternatives or to problem solve replacement strategies. Parents who function as partners in the intervention and educational process are also willing to implement reasonable strategies suggested by other team members and to help their children with school assignments if appropriate. They talk frequently with teachers and the other professionals who work with their child to share progress and needs.

Be active in your child's school and classroom

Being active can mean being an active team member with responsibilities for home interventions and evaluation of progress, volunteering in your child's classroom, or sending notes to the teacher on occasion. Specific activities depend on the age of your child, the culture and norms of the school (high school, middle, elementary, preschool), and the preference of the team members (especially the family members). Your level of activity will change over time.

Family members find that they may be very active during transitions from one grade to another or from one school to another or at the initiation of new services. Sometimes the beginning of a sports activity or other extracurricular activity requires a little more attention and team involvement. In addition, home and family needs also affect the level and intensity of parent involvement in the classroom.

Family members attempt to balance these factors and determine what works best for the whole family. Many families find that attending scheduled parent-teacher (or professional) meetings provides a basic or minimum level of involvement and an opportunity to judge whether more involvement is necessary. In addition, informal conversations and discussions with professional team members give family members opportunities to evaluate their level of participation and adjust it if necessary. Family members may re-evaluate their choices and reconsider their roles and level of participation at any time in the educational process.

Family members must also be honest in sharing their own strengths, areas of need, and things they feel comfortable doing. Family members may let the other team members know that they are more comfortable helping with a field trip than making posters. They may also want to provide information about changes at home that may affect their child's success at school. However, the amount and type of information are up to the family. For example, parents may want the other team members to know that the family will be away from home for the week, but they do not have to give a reason unless they are comfortable doing so. Families have the right to maintain their privacy and sense of family.

Share helpful information with the professionals

Team members are often from diverse racial or ethnic populations with equally diverse cultural practices and values. This diversity is celebrated but may also pose

barriers in the collaborative team process. Successful family and professional team members recognize their own cultural perspectives and seek to understand the perspectives of other team members. This step is essential in collaboration and in the development of the educational plan and its implementation and evaluation.

What each member believes is important for the child to learn and do depends on their own belief system. Although the family guides the educational plan, each team member shares responsibility for its development and implementation. Therefore, family members may want to share why they stress certain goals and behaviors. If, for example, independence is a valued lifelong goal in the family's culture, they will advocate for behaviors and skills that will promote independence for their child. However, if family and community membership and cohesive and collaborative problem solving are valued by the family and the community, their goals will be quite different.

Discussions about personal, family, and cultural beliefs and values should be open and honest without being judgmental or blaming. In addition, team members can incorporate information about cultural practices and beliefs into classroom practices.

Ask questions when you are unsure

Professional team members, like family members, have a responsibility to be consistent and honest in their communication and behavior. Teachers or other professionals (therapists, counselors, and principals) need to know when what they say or do is not clear. All team members must work to ensure that each member understands the assessment and intervention strategies and the goals and objectives, as well as which team members are responsible for their implementation. If family members are uncertain about a strategy or the effectiveness of the strategy, good team membership requires that they let others know of their uncertainty. This provides opportunities for ongoing evaluation and team monitoring of intervention strategies and for intervention and problem solving before the problem gets more serious or failure occurs.

Although family members are knowledgeable about their child, many come to the special education process with little information about schools and the educational process. They come with even less understanding of special education and related services. Parents and other family members often rely on their own experiences as

students to understand the school and educational process and may be fearful or apprehensive if these experiences were less than positive. Therefore, team members must be ever vigilant in sharing information about the special education process and its legal basis and obligations.

Unfortunately, the process changes often with each new federal legislation and state and local responses to meet federal requirements. When this occurs, family members need to ask questions and be informed about how these changes affect their child's education and transition to college or the workplace. All team members must provide information about their disciplines; state and federal regulations; community resources; and the assessment, intervention, and evaluation processes and the advantages and disadvantages inherent in each. In addition, family members provide new and critical information if something changes at home.

Inform teachers and other professionals about changes at home

People are creatures of habit and children are especially sensitive to changes in routines and events. Their mood and behavior can be affected by these events. Teachers and other professionals can be prepared to help only when family members let them know whether something has happened that might have an impact on the student's success in school.

Teachers will often call home to seek an explanation for a change in a child's behavior, motivation, or work habits. Again, be honest. Although older children may respond to these changes or events with less emotion or outward signs of anxiety, the impact of these changes for older children and adolescents should not be minimized. Sometimes, older children and adolescents are the most vulnerable to anxiety and fear about change.

Use the professionals as resources

Professional team members should be prepared to help you understand your child's behavior or academic successes or needs. Ask for this support when you need it. Professionals can explain the use of certain assessments or strategies, linkages with other members of the educational team, and community resources. Talk with them about problems you see at home that are not evident at school and attempt to use suggested strategies to address these areas of need. Once you have done this, you can let them know what worked or did not work, and why.

Prepare for transitions

When you know that your child will be moving to a new classroom, school, or teacher, take time to meet with the teacher to plan for these moves. Together with the other team members, family members can welcome this new member and share successes, challenges, and strategies. It is also important to talk with your child about these transitions so that he or she can be better prepared and feel more comfortable. Family members may want to attend open houses or take advantage of other opportunities to get to know the new teacher or school. These are often a first chance to form a new partnership and begin a new collaborative relationship.

SUMMARY

Families fulfill many roles as their children grow, begin school, makes transitions, and graduate from preschool, elementary, middle, and high school, and college. Supporting the family's roles of decision maker, team member, teacher, and contributor greatly enhances the ability of the school team to develop an individualized and effective education and intervention program. This process is based on the assumption that adequate information and support are provided to family members to assist them in making responsible and informed decisions. It engages the team of professionals and parents and family members in a collaborative and creative problem-solving process to achieve flexible and individualized participation for each team member and individualized intervention for the student.

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